

Bank of Resources - Disasters



Etched print of a landscape view of Wallsend's Church Pit showing the pithead structures and railways

Source Reference: Hair Thomas Illustrations TH/1/40

Dreadful EXPLOSION

Of the new PIT at WALLSEND COLLIERY, on Tuesday Morning, October 23, 1821.
By which Melancholy Accident FIFTY-TWO Lives have been lost.—With the Names of all the Sufferers.

It is the melancholy task of the writer to record one of the most distressing accidents which has happened in this part of the country for some time, and which has involved in one grand calamity several hundreds of human beings, our neighbours, and some perhaps our friends. Here we find awfully verbiage and adulatory language of the funeral dirge. — In the midst of life we are in death. It is almost without any of those intimations which usually forewarn when any of our friends are about to be called to the grave, kindly to prepare us for the fatal summons, and mothers have become widows, and their children, all stripped of their earthly comfort and support, are left to the cold hand of charity. Fathers and mothers now wail the loss of children on whom they had relied for the support of their declining years, and bid adieu to their friendly hands would, on the approach of the last enemy, have closed their eyes, and consigned their mortal remains to the bosom appointed for all things. Sisters and brothers, and unnumbered relatives, distinguished by all the endearing epithets and titles of kindred claims, and which draw closer the social and domestic ties—all these now mourn and lament the loss of friends, who, in some greater or less degree, sustained in their comforts or contributed to their support.

On Tuesday morning, about eight o'clock, a new pit (situated) New Felcher Seam, in Wallsend Colliery, was blown up with a most tremendous explosion which was heard at the distance of several miles round. It is not known with any certainty how the accident happened, but it is supposed to have been occasioned by the ignition of the hydrogen gas. We do not but say persons has been blamed on account of the neglect of the explosion having alarmed the people living in the neighbourhood, immediately came running to the fatal spot, wishing to witness the extent of the calamity. In the great confusion of persons that brought together on this melancholy scene—from motives alike of curiosity and common sympathy for the sufferers, we should in vain endeavour to describe the anxious, frenzied looks of grief and sorrow that marked the countenances of those who had friends alive in the pit. It was indeed mournfully affecting to see some of the bravest sibs and observe the agonies; whilst others, weeping and wailing aloud, had all comfort and consolation.

As soon as possible endeavours were made to render assistance to the sufferers, at least such of them as might be recovered from the pit, out of fifty-two persons found only two had escaped unhurt—four were got above ground alive, but in a very weak state, and some of whom are since dead.—The rest, to the amount of forty-eight, had all perished! The bodies were brought up one after another, as soon as they could be discovered, and were laid out, and the friends, heart-rending cries and tears of their distressed relations and friends, were anxiously waiting, at the mouth of the pit, the announcement, which was to seal their sorrows, and bring them, their families, helpless orphans and dependants, to a lasting misery and mourning. The bodies were laid in various postures and positions, some with arms outstretched, others variously bent, but all quite stiff, and hanging loose on the bones. Two boys were not killed, but they, one of them was severely mangled, being the dead one two Overmen, Michael Moon and William Bell, also all the Wastemen; among whom is mentioned the body of Thomas Holt, who was also a Wasteman of some justly acquired eminence in the industry of a singular industry and attention during his long life and education from several districts, he had acquired a wonderful proficiency in Algebra, Fluxions, and the higher branches of the Mathematics, accompanied with a competent share of general knowledge, which enabled him to assist himself in general Society with equal credit to himself and advantage to those with whom he usually associated. Whilst labouring with his fellow workmen in the pit, he was at the same time employed in directing their studies and communicating to them useful instructions; and they, in return, wisely confided to his care the education of their children. He was also the Clerk of several Benefit Societies. The loss of this man will be severely felt by the neighbourhood; as it will probably be long before his place be filled by a person of equal industry and talents. We lament to say he has left a widow and a large family wholly unsupported; but hope the humane and charitable who are acquainted with the calamity which has befallen them, will prevent their wants and alleviate their sufferings.

Unfortunately a number of the deceased have left large families, some 7 and some 8 children, wholly destitute.—Several of these were members of Benefit Societies, and their families will, of course, be entitled to a little temporary relief from that source. But the demand upon some of these useful institutions, from this melancholy accident, being so large, from the great number of deaths, it is feared they will either not be able to meet the sudden and extraordinary demand, or be altogether broken up and destroyed, by the total exhaustion of their funds.—This would be a subject of very deep regret, as it would cut off the hopes and dependence of numerous families in times of domestic trouble and distress, and deprive inestimable aid of its last refuge from want. That spirit of honest manly independence, which these institutions tend to cherish among the poor, ought not to be lightly esteemed—it is the parent of many virtues, and tends to avoid, in some degree the progress of a demoralizing system of pauperism, by which the poor are degraded infinitely beneath the rank of freemen. Ardentlly do we hope therefore that a portion of the public bounty will be directed to the purpose of enabling those benefit societies on which the pressure of the misfortune has principally fallen, to meet the present demand, and to make good their engagements with their poorer members who may be dependent upon them.

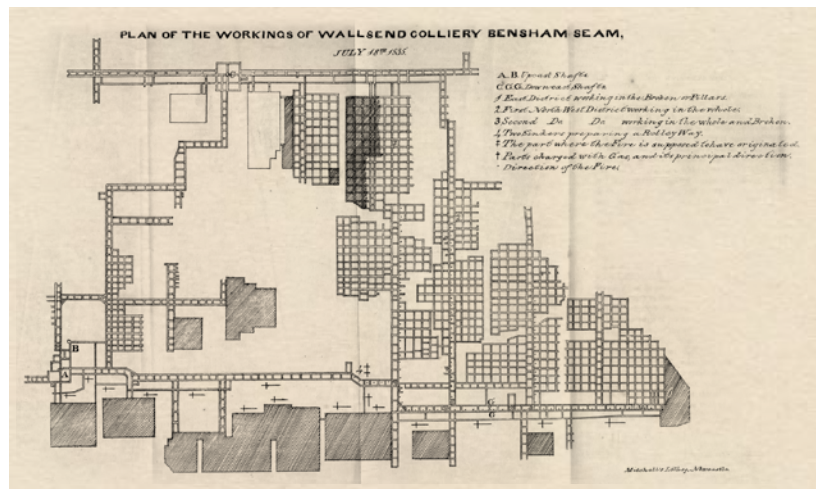
The village, in consequence of this calamity, presented a scene more melancholy, if possible, than that of Egypt, when the first born were smitten by the destroying angel. In the house of one man, named Hinton, three of his friends lay dead on one bed, whilst others in the village had one, two, and some three corpses.

The coffins of the Colliery provided coffins for all the deceased, and also contributed one guinea towards the funeral charges of each. Their liberality, we hope, will not stop here. They will, it is confidently expected, set on foot a subscription, in conjunction with other coal-owners and opulent persons, for the relief of all the widows, orphans, and families, and surviving sufferers by this awful catastrophe.

On Thursday afternoon, 28 of the bodies of the sufferers were interred at Wallsend, and 3 at the Ballast-hills, Newcastle.—Another of those brought up alive died on Thursday, and was buried on Friday, making in all 52 dead.

The collieries in the neighbourhood were held in, for the purpose of allowing the workmen to attend the funerals.—Several thousands were present at the solemnity, and the church-yard and walls of the burying ground were filled with one dense mass of people, whilst every one beheld with the greatest propriety and decorum.

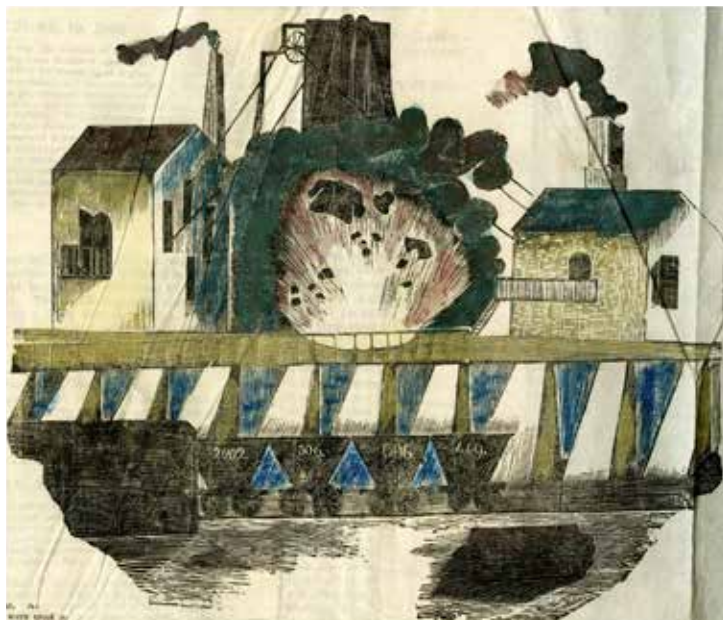
The NAMES of all the SUFFERERS.
Mich. Moon, father; Mich. Moon, jun. and Alex. Moon, sons of the above—Edw. Shotton, John Shotton, brothers—Rich. Heppell, father; Richard Heppell, son—Wm. Hutton, John Hutton, brothers—David Smart, Wm. Smart, brothers—John and Wm. Johnson, brothers—Thos. and Chris. Waggot, brothers—Geo. and John Fringlington, uncle and nephew—Edw. and Wm. Wilson, brothers—Henry and Robt. Bowdon, brothers—Wm. Bell, son and jun. father and son—John Norman, Wm. Jackson, Wm. Rogerson, Roger Baddie, Henry Bolam, Geo. Kyle, James Walker, John Gordon, Geo. Mason, Thos. Lewis, Thos. Davidson, John Binley, James Kelly, Geo. Thompson, Sam. Garratt, John Elliott, Geo. Longstaffe, Nich. English, Edw. Campbell, Wm. Coxon, Thos. Holt, Peter Hay, Robt. Delap, John Robinson, Robt. Bainbridge, James Jobling, John Farry, John Smith, Geo. Bosley, Thomas Haggart, and Robt. Bell were severely burnt, and are dangerously ill.
Edw. Conby and Wm. Johnson escaped unhurt.
J. Marshall, Printer, Newcastle.



Plan of the Workings of Wallsend Colliery Bensham Seam.

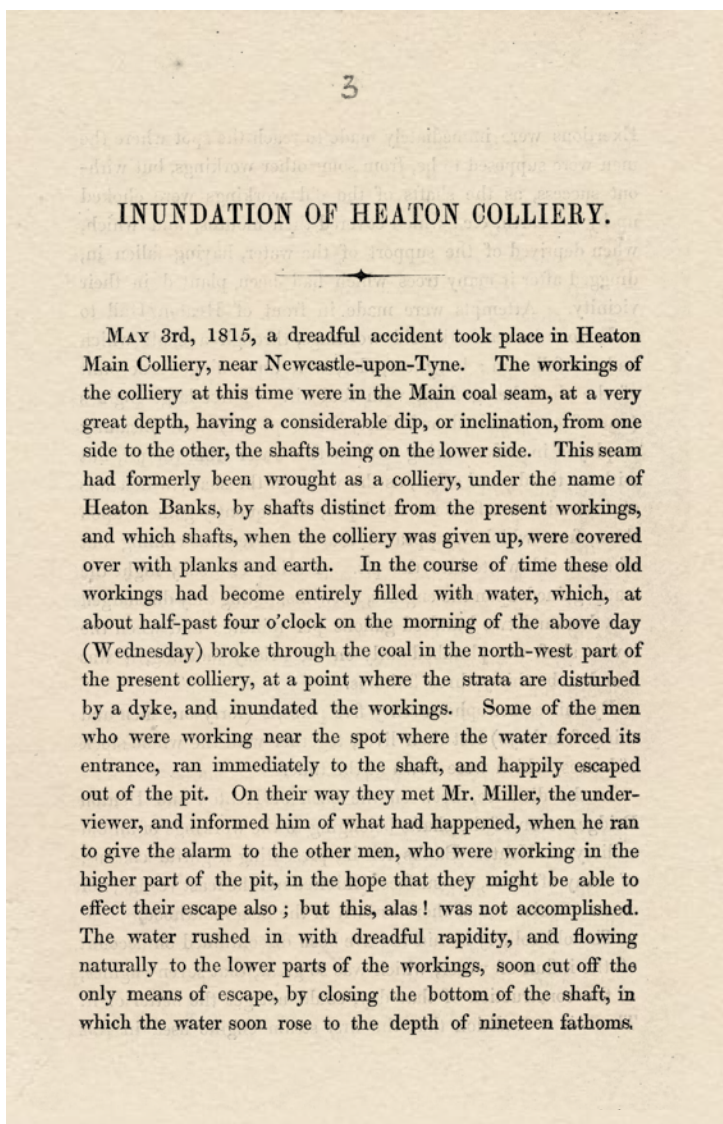
Source Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1874-The Wallsend Miner- Illustration Page 138- Bensham Seam

Newspaper report on the Dreadful Explosion at the Pit at Wallsend Colliery.
Reference: Rare-RB Folio 622 08 Wil-Pitman's Papers-Volume I-Page 21



An artistic drawing of the explosion at Wallsend Colliery.

Reference: Rare-RB Folio 622 08 Wil-Pitman's Papers-Volume II-Page 190



Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1853-A Letter from the Dead to the Living-The Letter Page 3



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Exertions were immediately made to reach the spot where the men were supposed to be, from some other workings, but without success, as the shafts of the old workings were choked up by the earth, &c., which covered their mouths, and which, when deprived of the support of the water, having fallen in, dragged after it many trees which had been planted in their vicinity. Attempts were made in front of Heaton Hall to endeavour to reach the old workings, through a shaft which had not fallen in; but these, also, were unavailing, on account of the shaft being filled with foul air. Three large engines (one of one hundred and thirty horse power) were instantly employed in endeavouring to draw the water from the pit, but without the desired effect, as the water in the shaft, which was at first nineteen fathoms in depth, subsequently gained upon them, from which it appeared that the water was coming out of some old waste into the pit. During Thursday night the water gained upon the engines, notwithstanding they discharged one thousand two hundred gallons per minute; and when the lowest shaft was plumbed early on the Friday morning, it was found to be thirty-three fathoms.

By this catastrophe seventy-five persons (forty-one men and thirty-four boys) lost their lives, together with the whole stock of horses, which were down at the time.

In the distance, between the back of Heaton and Benton Bridge, seven of the shafts belonging to the workings of an old colliery on Heaton Banks fell in, presenting frightful chasms, of many of these, the surface exhibited not the least vestige, nor was the existence of them known in the neighbourhood.

The old colliery is said to have been discontinued on account of the influx of water, which was so great, that seven engines, of the construction of that day, could not get the better of it. There is a tradition that the first steam engine used in this



Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1853-A Letter From the Dead to the Living- The Letter Page 5

Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1853-A Letter From the Dead to the Living- The Letter Page 4

part of the country was at, or near Heaton, and most probably it was on the colliery,* in the year 1714.

From various difficulties, the bodies of these unfortunate men were not arrived at until upwards of nine months from the time of the accident. The sufferers who thus found a living grave, left twenty-four widows and seventy-seven orphans, besides Mrs. Miller and her eight children, to deplore their untimely fate.

On the 6th of January, 1816, the first human body of the sufferers was brought to bank, in a state of great decay; but ascertained by the neckcloth to be that of William Scott, between seventy and eighty years of age, who attended one of the furnaces. Of a knife, which the deceased had in his pocket, the haft only (of bone) was entire, the blade being entirely corroded by the mixtures of the pyrites in the mire with water. His watch was also nearly destroyed by the same cause. It may, however, afford some speculation to the curious, that the articles of linen on the deceased were quite fresh and uninjured, but those of woollen fabric were entirely destroyed. In a few weeks afterwards, the remains of the rest of these unfortunate persons were found in different situations, in the workings of the pit.

There was one part of the workings very much on the rise, where several men and boys had been employed at the time of the inundation. At a crane adjoining the place, there were ten human bodies, and the carcases of two horses found. The water had never risen so high as the above workings, by eighty or a hundred yards. On proceeding up the roley-way to within about fifty yards of the crane, there were found two bodies lying near each other; and every ten or fifteen yards other

* The engineer was the reputed son of a Swedish nobleman, who taught Mathematics at Newcastle.

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two bodies, from which it was conjectured, that these men had gone, by two at a time, to the tail of the water; and their strength failing them through suffocation, they had fallen down and died.

Some bodies were also found among the water in the crane hole; and in a nail-chest was discovered the body of one of the lesser boys. Most of the bodies were found in a lying posture; but some were found sitting, particularly the body of George Dawson, which was sitting with the arms folded, resting his back against a brick stopping; and his features were so entire, that he was recognized at five or six yards distance. Diligent search was made to discover any writing with chalk upon the trap-doors or brattices, but nothing of the kind was found, with the exception of a tin candle-box, in the pocket of one of the boys, William Thew, on which was scratched a very touching letter to his widowed mother, an account of which is contained in the subjoined narrative or memoir.

On the 29th of February, 1816, thirty-nine of the bodies, forming a melancholy procession, were interred in trenches in the south-east corner of Wallsend Church.

MÉMOIR OF WILLIAM THEW,

ONE OF THE SUFFERERS IN THE INUNDATION OF HEATON COLLIERY, 1815.

WILLIAM THEW was the second son of John and Elizabeth Thew, and was seventeen years of age at the time of the catastrophe. His father, and an elder brother, aged twenty, named George, perished with him. A younger brother, John, was

Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1853-A Letter From the Dead to the Living- The Letter Page 6

one of those who, on the alarm of the bursting in of the water being made, escaped with others by the shaft. William and John were scholars in the Byker Sunday School at the time, and were steady and well-disposed boys. George and William met in class among the Wesleyan Methodists at the time; and the latter also attended Mr. Swallow's evening school at Catterick Buildings, where he learnt to write and cypher; but neither his father or eldest brother could write. His mother relates that her sons were very affectionate and steady; that after returning from their work, and when cleaned, and refreshed by their meals, they were in the habit of reading the Bible to her; and never retired to rest without prayer. Many pleasing anecdotes are related by their mother, particularly of William who seems to have been her favorite son. On one occasion he said to her, "Mother, when I'm a man I'll work hard for you, and keep you like a lady;" and the mother observes that his wishes and intentions have been in a manner realized in the support she has received through the letter he wrote to her in the pit. Imagination cannot portray the scene that would take place after the breaking in of the water, and when all hope of escape was cut off. To contemplate seventy-five human beings all at once incarcerated in a living tomb, with the appalling prospect of a lingering, though certain death. They had not died from hunger, as they had killed one of the horses and had cut slices off its hind quarter, some of which were found in the caps and wallets of the men, unconsumed. They had likewise an abundant supply of spring water. The exhaustion of the atmospheric air by the influx of water bringing with it foul air, was no doubt the cause of death, probably in a day or two at the most. Many of the men, and some of the boys, were pious, and were members of the Methodist Society, and most of the boys attended the adjoining Sunday Schools. It is probable

Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1853-A Letter From the Dead to the Living- The Letter Page 7



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that the pious men would employ their time in exhorting those who were irreligious to repentance and faith in Christ; and however simple these addresses may have been, they were no doubt listened to with intense interest and attention. Prayer and even singing were also offered up. A striking distinction appeared in the positions and manner of those who were known to be wicked men from those who feared God; and while the former seemed to have struggled hard in death, the latter appeared to have sweetly fallen asleep in Christ Jesus! The person spoken of in the former narrative, George Dawson, was an instance among others of the apparent composure with which he met the last enemy. A placid smile rested upon his countenance; and even the arms had not altered their position, being folded across his breast, after remaining nine months under ground.

After the bodies were confined, the relatives were permitted to go down the pit for the purpose of recognizing their husbands or children; and Elizabeth Thew, the widow, was among the foremost. She readily recognized William's body by his fine auburn hair; but what must have been her transported, yet agonized feelings, when in one of his pockets was found his tin candle-box, on which, in the darkness of the suffocating pit, or only with the dim light of his Davy lamp, the dear boy had, with a nail, engraved on his candle-box, the following touching and consolatory epistle:—

"Fret not, dear mother, for we were singing while we had time, and praising God. Mother, follow God more than ever I did;" and then on the other side, which, it is supposed, must have been dictated by his father, as it bears his signature, though he could not write: *"If Johnny is saved, be a good lad to God, and thy mother."* JOHN THEW.

(The annexed is a fac-simile of the box and writing.)

Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1853-A Letter From the Dead to the Living- The Letter Page 8



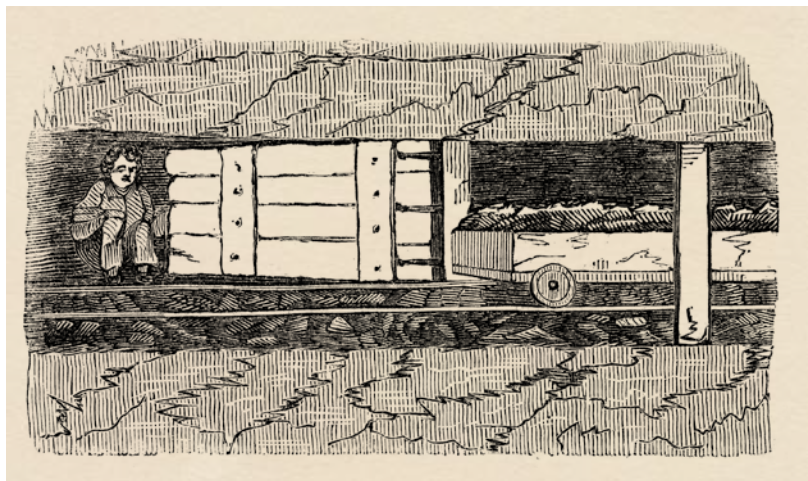
Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1853-A Letter From the Dead to the Living- The Letter



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Reference: 19 C 1801-1850 Coll 331 3822
con – the condition and treatment –
illustration page 41

18	Edwd. McNay	putter	..	..	..	..	—
75	Ralph Waggott	trapper	..	..	..	widow	10
31	Matt. Soulsby	onsetter	..	..	..	widow	3
9	George Kyle	trapper	..	..	..	..	—
21	John Waggott	putter	..	..	..	mother	3
18	John Hall	putter	..	} brothers	{	..	—
11	George Hall	putter	..			..	—
10	Joseph Wanlas	trapper	..	..	..	..	—
24	William Reay	hewer	..	} brothers	{	mother	1
28	Andrew Reay	hewer	..			widow	3
11	Thos. Huggup	trapper	..	..	..	..	—
19	David Collins	putter	..	..	..	mother	2
15	Luke Watson	trapper	..	..	..	..	—

The Wall's End Miner; or A Brief
Memoir...by James Everett (1838)

Reference: CLLOC-CLARKE 1874-The
Wallsend Miner-Page 205.

severely burnt. One man's arm was so severely
scorched that the Flesh dropped from it while
enduring the operation of dressing. 36 indi-

Newspaper Article, Pitman's Papers
c.19TH Vol. I

Reference: Rare-RB Folio 622 08 Wil-
Pitman's Papers-Volume I-Page 50.



Reference: 19C-1801-1850 331 3822 CON-
Children in Mines and Collieries-Page 47



Reference: 19C-1801-1850 331 3822 CON-
Children in Mines and Collieries-Page 36

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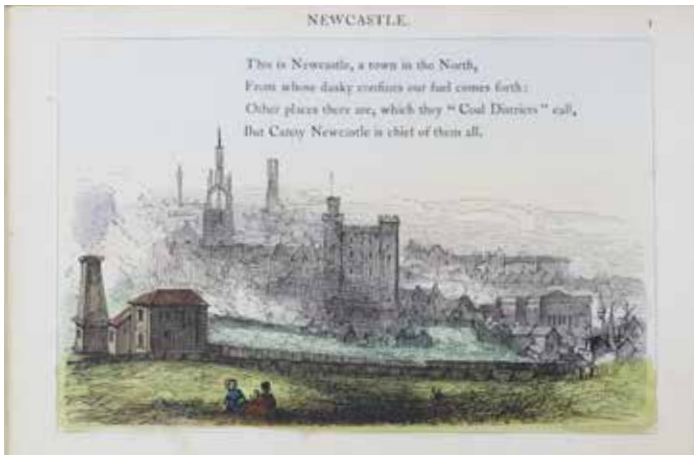
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Etched print of a landscape view of collier boats being loaded at the Wallsend drops

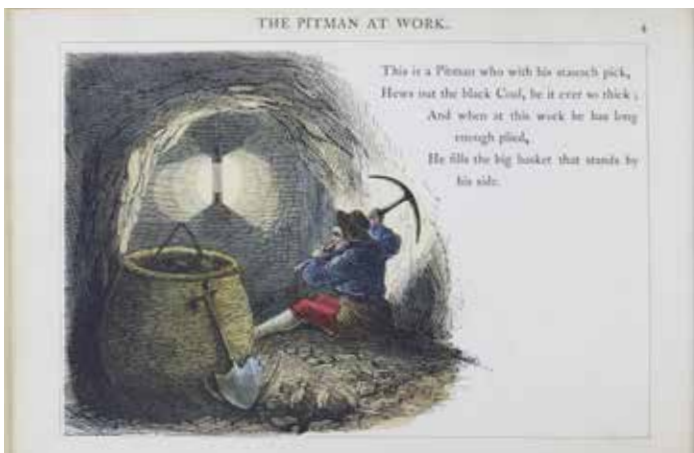
Reference: Hair (Thomas) Illustrations TH/1/37



NEWCASTLE.
 This is Newcastle, a town in the North,
 From whose dusky confines our fuel comes forth:
 Other places there are, which they "Coal Districts" call,
 But Canny Newcastle is chief of them all.

Six illustrated stories 'In Rhymes and Pictures'

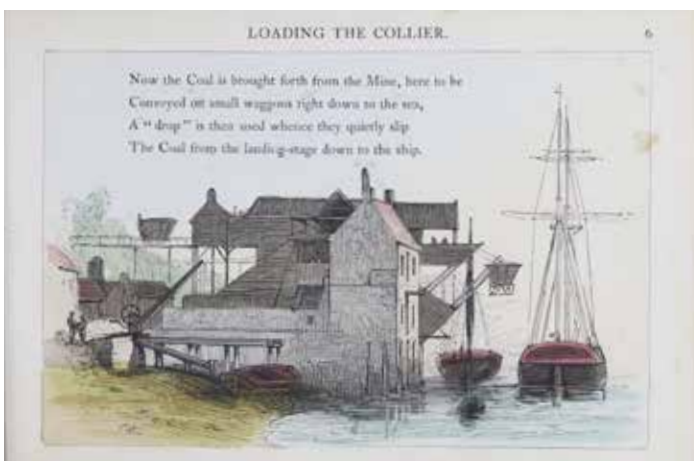
Reference: Rare Books RB-821-8-SIX-34 page 2.



THE PITMAN AT WORK.
 This is a Pitman who with his staunch pick,
 Hews out the black Coal, be it ever so thick,
 And when at this work he has long
 enough plod,
 He fills the big basket that stands by
 his side.

Six illustrated stories 'In Rhymes and Pictures'

Reference: Rare Books RB-821-8-SIX-40 page 5.



LOADING THE COLLIER.
 Near the Coal is brought forth from the Mine, here to be
 Conveyed on small waggons right down to the sea,
 A "drop" is then used whence they quietly slip
 The Coal from the landing-stage down to the ship.

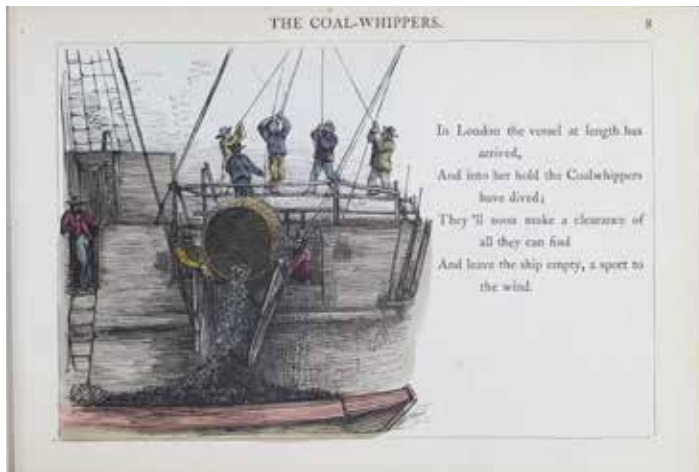
Six illustrated stories 'In Rhymes and Pictures'

Reference: Rare Books RB-821-8-SIX-43 page 7.

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Six illustrated stories 'In Rhymes and Pictures'

Reference: Rare Books RB-821-8-SIX-47 page 9.



Six illustrated stories 'In Rhymes and Pictures'

Reference: Rare Books RB-821-8-SIX-50 page 11.



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Reference: Photograph (print) The North of England Institute of Mining and Mechanical Engineers at Neville Hall seen from the north-west © Crown copyright. Historic England Archive. OP11437

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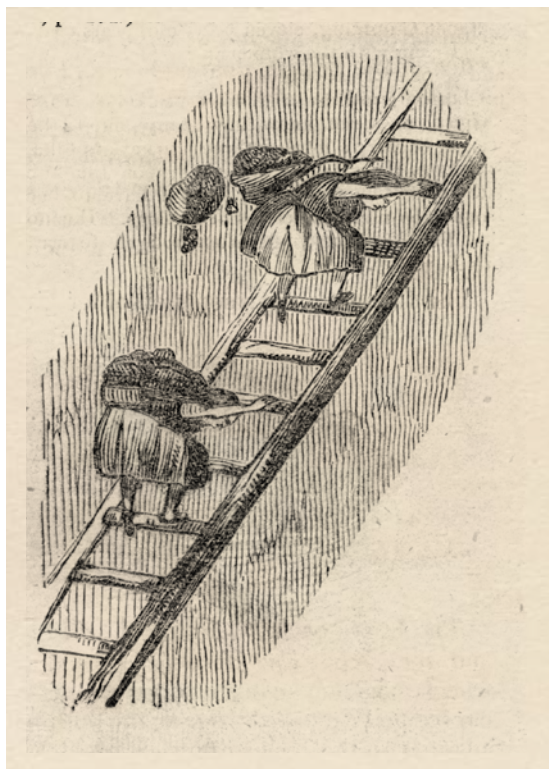
<http://archivesalive.ncl.ac.uk>

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West View of the High Level Bridge at Newcastle

Reference: Local Illustrations ILL/11/6



Reference: 19th C. Collection 331.3822 CON-60

